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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Beautifully and powerfully written, Ashley. Your students are lucky to have you. And I'm lucky to have this context and perspective that can inform our future approach to such stories. Anytime you'd like to write on educational issues, I'd love to see a contribution. —All the best, Jeff

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

#####BEGIN HED#####

1 Teachers can't cure bigotry

#####END HED#####

#####BEGIN SUBHED#####

2 'I am tasked with ensuring students aren't harassed while
3 being on the receiving end of harassing behavior from the very
4 adults demanding that schools "fix" everything. And then we act
5 shocked when behavior doesn't change.'

#####END SUBHED#####

6 TEXT BODY:

#####BEGIN TEXT#####

7 WHEN THE *Brattleboro Reformer* reported that Leland &
8 Gray Union Middle and High School and the Windham Central
9 Supervisory Union had agreed to a \$250,000 settlement over

10 racial and sexual harassment, the framing was immediate and
11 familiar: The school had failed.
12 The article emphasized what educators allegedly failed
13 to do, quoted officials stressing the “essential role that Vermont
14 law entrusts to educators” in stopping student-on-student
15 harassment, and presented the settlement as a historic reckoning.

16 Shortly afterward, [follow-up coverage](#) intensified the
17 message. An advocate was quoted as saying, bluntly, “You didn’t
18 do the best you could.” School leaders were accused of hiding
19 behind settlements.

20 The solution, all sources agreed, was more training —
21 more workshops, more professional development, more
22 responsibility placed squarely on educators.

23 I want to be clear: Two students endured racism and
24 harassment that deserved a serious response. These facts must be
25 named without defensiveness, qualification, or equivocation. We
26 failed those students, and we cannot afford to fail the next.

27 But if we allow the story of this specific kind of failure to
28 be told as if it begins and ends inside a school building, that only
29 guarantees its repetition. Framing this as a failure of teachers
30 misrepresents both the origins of the harm and who is
31 empowered to stop it.

32 * * *

33 THERE IS A persistent fantasy in public discourse that
34 teachers possess sweeping institutional power — that if
35 harassment continues, it must be because educators failed to
36 intervene or lacked the proper training.

37 In reality, teachers do not determine disciplinary
38 outcomes, control record-keeping systems, decide on legal
39 strategy, negotiate with insurers, or even know the full extent of
40 the consequences imposed after a hazing, harassment, or
41 bullying investigation.

42 What we control is what happens in front of us, in real
43 time, inside classrooms that are increasingly vulnerable to the
44 whims of the outside world.

45 We interrupt harm when we see it: separate students,
46 create classroom procedures, document incidents, report
47 concerns, follow policy, support victims, and repeatedly try to
48 create safe spaces. And all of this happens in addition to the
49 actual “teaching” part of the job.

50 And then we go home and read headlines declaring that
51 we “did little or nothing.”

52 * * *

53 AFTER OVER A DECADE of teaching, going on 10 years at
54 L&G, I’d like to ground the conversation about harm and failure
55 in the reality of a school, rather than the abstraction that coverage
56 of these events promoted.

57 Teachers aren’t putting racial slurs on vocabulary lists.
58 We aren’t reminding kids when, where, or how to say something
59 cruel, or teaching strategies on the best way to bully someone.
60 These are lessons learned at home, and I know this because I
61 interact with people from those homes as a crucial part of my
62 job.

63 I have had countless interactions with parents who will
64 defend and deny anything and everything on behalf of their
65 children. I have been accused of “bullying” for sharing a detailed
66 behavior log with a parent. I have been confronted by an enraged
67 parent who stormed into my classroom during student arrival to
68 accuse me of “losing” their child’s work, only to discover the
69 incomplete assignment in the student’s backpack. One parent —
70 an educator themselves — sent such aggressive and demeaning
71 messages that they were ultimately barred from contacting me
72 directly.

73 I am tasked with ensuring students aren’t harassed while
74 being on the receiving end of harassing behavior from the very
75 adults demanding that schools “fix” everything. And then we act
76 shocked when behavior doesn’t change.

77 The uncomfortable truth at the center of all of this is that
78 when students use racist language, mock civil rights, threaten
79 peers over sexual orientation, or otherwise dehumanize their

80 classmates, they are demonstrating behavior they internalized
81 through family conversations, access to online spaces, peer
82 reinforcement, political rhetoric, and from what adults excuse,
83 defend, or remain silent about.

84 Children are not born racist. They are taught — explicitly
85 or implicitly — what is acceptable.

86 I can teach empathy all day long; I can challenge
87 stereotypes, facilitate restorative conversations, and intervene
88 when harm occurs, but children will mirror what is modeled and
89 defended at home and in their communities. No amount of
90 professional development can override 18 hours a day of
91 messaging outside of school.

92 * * *

93 WHAT MAKES THE public conversation around this
94 settlement especially frustrating is that it echoes a pattern
95 Vermont has been stuck in for decades.

96 As early as 1999, state-level civil rights reporting
97 identified racial harassment in Vermont's public schools and
98 emphasized teacher training as a corrective measure. Decades
99 later, after anti-bullying laws, expanded diversity, equity, and
100 inclusion initiatives, and millions spent on professional
101 development, the same headlines continue to appear.

102 At this point, it seems clear that repeatedly returning to
103 "training" for educators cannot address the root of this problem.

104 Recent reporting acknowledges this tension between
105 who is responsible and who is blamed when students aren't
106 protected from harassment. Coverage of the L&G settlement notes
107 that harassment has surged statewide, that the Vermont Human
108 Rights Commission is overwhelmed and underfunded, and that
109 retaliation silences students across many systems, not just
110 education.

111 Parents quoted in these articles concede that educators
112 are not given enough support to manage the expectations placed
113 upon us. This acknowledgement matters because it emphasizes
114 what teachers and school leaders already know: Rather than

115 being the failure of a single school or district, this is, in fact, a
116 societal failure.

117 Indicting individual schools and districts while
118 acknowledging a statewide crisis and demanding "[more training](#)"
119 as the only possible solution — despite decades of such training
120 producing little evidence of change — is deeply hypocritical.

121 When advocates say, "You didn't do the best you could,"
122 I wish I could ask them how they know that with certainty. Have
123 they tracked every report, consequence, and follow-up? Do they
124 know what teachers are allowed to do and what limitations we
125 face?

126 Accountability matters, but without an honest
127 accounting of constraints and causes, it seems a lot more like
128 convenient scapegoating. As a teacher, I'm expected to solve
129 racism, homophobia, misogyny, trauma, neglect, and online
130 radicalization while being stripped of authority, resources, and
131 societal trust. This isn't accountability; it's abandonment.

132 The national context only deepens this problem. At the
133 same time as schools are being told to do more, the federal
134 government is retreating from public education, weakening civil-
135 rights enforcement, and offloading responsibility down the
136 pipeline — onto districts, schools, and ultimately individual
137 teachers like myself.

138 Oversight is shrinking and funding is uncertain, yet the
139 broader forces shaping children's beliefs remain largely
140 untouched. We are divesting from the structures intended to
141 protect students while demanding that educators compensate for
142 every failure, from the top down.

143 * * *

144 TO BE CLEAR, I will keep teaching. I will keep intervening.
145 I will continue to care deeply about the kids in my school and in
146 my community. However, I cannot be expected to repair what is
147 broken outside my classroom walls.

148 When parents and families refuse accountability, their
149 children mirror this behavior, locking all of us — families,

150 teachers, students, and community members — into a zero-sum
151 game in which no one wins and everyone suffers.

152 We failed the two students at the center of L&G's
153 harassment lawsuit. And that "we" includes the families and
154 communities absent from coverage of this and similar stories.

155 Let me be clear: I am not asking that the responsibility
156 for protecting students from harassment and bullying be shifted
157 from educators and schools. I am simply asking families and
158 communities to shoulder their share.

159 Without this partnership, there is no settlement, no
160 amount of professional training, no teacher-blaming article that
161 will solve the problem.

162 If we want better kids, we must expect better from all of
163 the adults in their lives.

#####END TEXT#####

Bio/COATTAIL:

#####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL#####

164 **ASHLEY MATSON** teaches English at Leland & Gray
165 Union Middle and High School.

#####END BIO/COATTAIL#####

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